



## How to be Happy



In the first century, a philosopher named Epictetus said, "Men are disturbed not by events but rather by the views they take of them." What this means is that it is not what happens to you that upsets you; it is the way you look at it. Another way of putting it is to say that our feelings are based on our own thought processes rather than on the events around us. This explains why some people can handle difficult situations pretty well. They have a philosophy, a set of beliefs, or a way of thinking about the events of their life that keeps them brave and cheerful instead of fearful, angry, ashamed, or depressed.



It is not really going to court, being ridiculed in front of others, speaking to a large group of strangers, or being threatened by someone much bigger than you that makes you nervous or fearful. It is that you are quite convinced that IF you get a bad decision or IF the others think you are a wimp, or IF you forget your speech, or IF someone tries to start a fight that **YOU COULDN'T STAND IT!** Or that it would be **PERFECTLY UNBEARABLE!** Alternatively, that it would be **TRULY TERRIBLE AND AWFUL!** Moreover, all that is crazy. In fact, it would be exactly as bad as a rational analysis would reveal, but you are not doing a rational analysis when you are nervous. You are thinking irrationally and, in this case, "awfulising."

It is not the behaviour of your spouse, the attitude of a checkout person, the decision of a jury, or being treated unfairly that makes you angry. It is that you are quite convinced that things **SHOULD NOT** or **MUST NOT** be that way! Alternatively, that people **HAVE GOT TO** be reasonable. Sometimes we can see that there is another idea in there, namely, "If I get mad enough they'll **HAVE** to straighten out." Moreover, all that is crazy too. It would be highly desirable if people were more reasonable, but they unfortunately do not **HAVE** to be. The idea of importance here is what is meant by "should." If it means, "It would be better" then it is rational, but if it means "It's **GOT TO BE THAT WAY**" then it is plainly irrational. It is this second, irrational, style of thinking that leads to undesirable anger.

It isn't your past mistakes, rumours about your family background, comments about your sexual behaviour, or negative remarks about your intelligence that make you feel ashamed or guilty (poor little guy!) It is that you believe strongly that if you did something wrong, or if your family had a bad reputation, or your sexual behaviour was not perfectly acceptable, or if you are not smarter than a certain



smartness, it means that **YOU ARE NO GOOD!** Moreover, that is some more crazy stuff. There actually is not any such thing as a totally bad person. We recognise this fact when we say of someone we do not like, "Well, I suppose his mother loves him!" This is an important idea, but it is difficult to be clear. A person experiencing intense shame is practicing self-condemnation. They are condemning their whole self, and that

is why they feel so rotten. A smarter strategy is to condemn your bad behaviour without kicking yourself in the teeth. It is not the whole person who is worthless, just some of the items in their repertoire of behaviours.

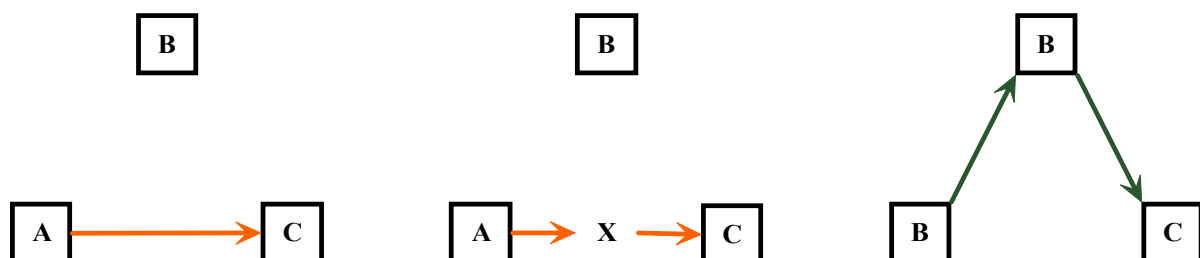
It is not that you can no longer do what you like best because of circumstances, or that your friends, relatives, and/or lovers have seemingly forgotten you, or that you are not getting any younger. It is that you ardently believe that you **MUST** have these things you have lost in order to be happy. Just look around you and you can see that **THAT** is crazy! Actually very little is required for ordinary happiness. Depression usually includes all of the irrational thinking modes described above plus a sort of "poor me" attitude. Nevertheless, do not forget that it also has biological determinants.



Therefore, what we are saying is that if you are in reasonably good biological health and have a well thought out rational philosophy you will almost never be very upset about anything for very long and you will be happier, pretty brave and cheerful in spite of the many frustrations and disappointments of life. The goal is to help you to develop that kind of philosophy for yourself. If you can avoid being emotionally upset, you

can constructively pursue and attain your goals with much greater success. At first, you may think the aim is to make you passive, to let people walk over you, to be cold and unfeeling no matter what happens. It may seem that way to you because you have grown up around people who believe that you **SHOULD** get upset when things go wrong, and you will probably find it hard to believe that circumstances really are **NOT** the cause of emotions all by themselves. We are not trying to do away with emotions here. Constructive emotional arousal actually energises people to accomplish their goals. However, negative emotions such as excessive fear, anger, guilt, or depression, take away your energy and make you less intelligent than you would otherwise be. Those negative emotions actually prevent you from reaching your goals and frequently cause you to make bad decisions. Learning to control them when needed can only help you to achieve whatever it is you want to achieve in life.

The following is called the ABC Theory of Emotions. It repeats what has already been said but with a picture to help. Look at the triangle below:



In this triangle, A stands for Activating event. B stands for your Beliefs, or thoughts, philosophy, or attitude. C stands for the emotional Consequences. Many people believe that A causes C (1). You can tell that they believe it because of the things they say: "You made me mad!" "You hurt my feelings!" "Crowds make me nervous!" "That was a

depressing movie!" "My father could always make me feel guilty by just looking at me in a certain way!" "He was laying this guilt trip on me!" "How does it make you feel when \_\_\_\_\_?" This belief is represented by the red line from A to C, above. However, as we have seen, this is not the way things really work. (Notice that in (2) the red line becomes a red X to show that A does NOT directly cause C.) What really happens is that you find out that your mother-in-law is going to spend a week with you at A, you think something like, "She will probably criticise me the whole time she's here! The old bat! She should not be so unfair! It's absolutely awful when she carries on like that and I just can't stand it!" at B, and you get very angry at C and can't think straight, deal with your mother-in-law tactfully and effectively, or think of a clever way to improve the likelihood that her visit will not be as unpleasant as usual. All this is represented above by the green line (3) that moves from A to B and from B to C. We say that A triggers B and B causes C. Events trigger your beliefs and your beliefs are responsible for the emotional tone of your life.

## FEAR

This is the second lesson in rational thinking. We learned that it is not what happens to you that makes you nervous; it is the way you think. And since there's no advantage to being nervous, it is obvious that ANYTHING that you think that makes you nervous is CRAZY, STUPID, or (to use a more polite word) IRRATIONAL. We are going to explore the stupid beliefs that cause fear and the rational, sensible beliefs that can be used to counteract fear. We are going to show you that you can indeed get control of fear when you begin to understand its cause and begin to practice substituting rational beliefs for irrational ones. Bertrand Russell once said, "It is impossible to be afraid of anything if you have thought about it deeply enough."



We have fear in all degrees, from what is usually called WORRY all the way to ABJECT TERROR. Fear can make you appear stupid and lazy. Fear keeps people from bravely going out into the world and making a happy, fulfilling life for themselves. The following brief outline lists the most common causes of fear and the simplest, most straightforward cures for this disabling emotion.

### HOW TO REALLY OVERCOME YOUR FEARS:

There are, basically, three steps in overcoming any kind of unwanted emotional reaction. Like making any change in your behaviour, some effort on your part is required. Here are the three steps:

#### I. PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR FEELINGS

One of the biggest roadblocks to getting better control of your life is a failure to realise WHEN negative emotions are interfering with your happiness, or preventing you

from reaching your goals. A lot of psychotherapy consists of merely training people to become more aware of themselves.

## **II. IDENTIFY YOUR IRRATIONAL THINKING**

Negative feelings are always caused by irrational beliefs of some sort. The following discussion will help you to deal with the particular ideas that are causing you problems.

## **III. VIGOROUSLY QUESTION, CHALLENGE, DEBATE, UPROOT, AND ELIMINATE THE IRRATIONAL IDEAS AND SUBSTITUTE RATIONAL ONES.**

The list below will give you some helpful hints on ways to challenge the stupid beliefs, which cause fear, anxiety, self-consciousness, worry, some forms of laziness, and other unnecessary and disabling negative emotions.

### **FOUR COMMON CAUSES OF FEAR AND THEIR CURES**

#### **A. Causes (awfulising)**

1. It would be PERFECTLY TERRIBLE or PERFECTLY AWFUL if I fail (or if "it" happens!).
2. I COULD NOT STAND IT if people criticised me (or if "it" happens!)
3. "It" MUST be prevented at all costs!
4. A person OUGHT TO worry about some things, and if they did not they would be CRAZY!

#### **B. Cures (disliking)**

1. What would ACTUALLY be so TERRIBLE or AWFUL about failure? I would not like it, but it would not be the end of the world.
2. If people criticise me, where is the evidence that I cannot stand it? I certainly could stand it, although I would not like it. I can stand anything if it does not kill me, and if it kills me, I will be out of it!
3. Why MUST it be prevented? I cannot stop "it" from happening by worrying about it. Moreover, there are plenty of things that cannot be prevented at all, such as earthquakes, volcanoes, death, etc.
4. Where is the evidence that ANYTHING is accomplished by worrying? There is no such evidence. It is childish to think that MY nervous system can control what happens in the outside world! What a relief! I can relax and the world probably will not stop or come apart.

The crucial difference between irrational and rational thoughts is often a matter of absolutism. A nervous person does not merely see that it would be undesirable to be

criticised, for example. They believe that it would be ABSOLUTELY UNBEARABLE to be criticised.

### **C. Be careful! Beware of becoming rude and/or reckless.**

The above does not mean that you want to learn not to CARE what others think of you - merely that you do not upset yourself when other people do not like you or do not approve of your behaviour. In addition, this will inevitably happen some of the time. Nor does it mean that you foolishly take unwise risks, merely that you do not worry yourself sick over unavoidable ones.

## **ANGER**

The topic now in rational thinking is anger. Anger is an emotional reaction, like fear, which comes in different degrees: small, medium, and large, as well as many in-between states. Like fear, there are many different degrees of anger. Anger ranges from mild annoyance to blind rage.

Is anger desirable? Some people we know get angry very easily and others seldom get very angry. Most people agree that some degree of anger can be a good thing. A moderate expression of anger between husband and wife, for example, often acts as an important communication, which serves to keep the relationship on an even keel. However, it is also easy to see that a lot of anger is highly undesirable. One thing that is very undesirable about strong anger is that it tends to interfere with clear thinking. It makes us dumb. We all know of times when we have said things when we were angry that we really did not mean or else we have said things that we have regretted later. Anger is undesirable when it leads us to do self-defeating things, and it often does.



One mistake people often make is in thinking that anger is necessary to accomplish goals. Strong determination is certainly necessary to accomplish difficult goals, but determination and anger are NOT the same thing at all. Even in a football game, the coach may urge his team to "hit 'em hard!" and this may sound like he is telling them to get mad. However, if a player really gets mad, he loses his judgement and earns a penalty from the referee for "unnecessary roughness."

Another mistake is to think that if a person does not act angry or show his anger that he is not really angry. Nevertheless, anger is a feeling inside of us. Probably all of us have learned to hide our anger from others at least some of the time, but the anger is really there anyway. There is some scientific evidence for the idea that "bottled up" anger can make us ill in quite a number of different ways such as high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, and headaches. Learning to recognise our own angry feelings is not always easy because we have, most of us, learned to fool even ourselves about anger!

Have you ever angrily disclaimed, "I am NOT ANGRY!"

Another mistake is the belief that anger is like steam in a boiler and that it will help to "blow off steam". Research has shown that blowing off steam is only a temporary help at best as long as there is still fire under the boiler. The aim of the following discussion is to show how we can actually learn to turn off the fire, because anger (like other negative emotions) is caused by our own thoughts and beliefs, not circumstances. In the following outline, the thoughts, which cause anger, are listed under letter A, the rational thoughts, which cure anger, are listed under B, and a caution is included in letter C. You will see that this outline is similar to the one on fear in the previous lesson.

## **SIX COMMON CAUSES OF ANGER AND THEIR CURES**

### **A. Causes (awfulising and demanding)**

1. He should not do that!
2. She should be more considerate!
3. They have to respect my rights!
4. He must obey the rules!
5. She has to listen to reason!
6. They ought to be fair!

### **B. Cure (disliking and preferring)**

1. Why shouldn't he? I would rather he did not do that, or I would prefer him not to, but there is no Cosmic Law that says he should not. He probably has poor judgement. Maybe he was raised wrong. Maybe he is dumb.
2. Why should she? If I knew everything about her, I would probably find that whatever way she is it is the way she should be. There is no Cosmic Law that says she should or must be the way I want her to be.
3. Why have they got to? It would be much nicer if they did, and I would greatly prefer that they respect my rights. However, they do not have to! Unfortunately, they have a right to be wrong.
4. Why must he? I would like him to obey the rules, but I cannot make him do it by being angry.
5. Why does she have to? She does not have to do anything (except maybe die some day.)
6. Why ought they to be fair? It might be nice, but the world is not always fair and it probably never will be! I had better bravely find a way to reach my goals in an unfair world. It is the only one I have!

### **C. Be careful! Beware of becoming a doormat or a jellyfish.**

The above does not mean, "Flop down and accept whatever happens." It does mean, "When there is nothing you can do, don't upset yourself about it! If there is something you can do, do it!"

## SHAME

This section is about the feeling of shame, or as it is sometimes called, guilt. Like fear and anger, shame can be mild, moderate, or severe with countless variations in between.



Like fear and anger, shame can interfere with your life. A person who has strong feelings of shame usually lacks energy and initiative and instead of running their own life, they are very likely to let other people do it for them. Then they usually end up very angry and unhappy! Feelings of shame are not caused by the events of your past life or by the knowledge that someone may have found out about those events. Those highly unpleasant feelings are caused by the way you think about yourself and your past. People who are ashamed always "awfullise" about what they have done or have failed to do and then tell themselves that because they are not perfect that they are bad through and through! There is also the idea that through suffering they can, in some mysterious way, pay for their misdeeds or inadequacies. These are the irrational ideas that cause and maintain feelings of shame, and we are going to deal with these thoughts or philosophies in a way that will reveal just how nutty they really are!

One very common opinion about shame is that you ought to be ashamed of some things. Although this opinion is very common, it is nonetheless quite irrational. Shame is an emotion that interferes with your intelligence, destroys your motivation, and results in a pattern of body language that invites others to attempt to dominate you. How can that be constructive? Granted that you have misbehaved in a highly undesirable way, isn't that enough of a problem? Why make two problems out of one? There is a common belief that you will not correct your mistakes if you do not feel ashamed of them. It would be more accurate to say that you will not be motivated to correct your mistakes if you do not see clearly what they are and why they are undesirable. Nevertheless, shame will not help you to do that! Finally, there is the idea that somehow you are paying for your mistakes by suffering. Who is getting paid? This is really nonsense!

## FIVE COMMON CAUSES OF SHAME AND THEIR CURES

### A. Causes (awfulising, demanding, and self-downing)

1. What I did was perfectly awful!
2. It should not have happened!
3. I have got to suffer to pay for what I did!
4. I have got to find a way to make everything all right!
5. I am a terrible person because I am not perfect!

## **B. Cures (disliking, preferring, and rational self-acceptance)**

1. Granted that what I did was highly undesirable, but how was it perfectly awful? Where is the evidence that it was so EXTREMELY bad that I have to suffer forever?
2. Why shouldn't it have happened? At the time, I was using bad judgement, perhaps because I was already ashamed of something. I had better keep my eyes open from here on to avoid a repeat performance!
3. Where is the evidence that I have to suffer? There is no law of the universe that hands out suffering to people who have behaved badly. It is bad enough that I did it. Why make two problems out of one by suffering on top of everything else?
4. How can I possibly do that? Time machines have not been invented yet. What a relief! No need to have a nervous fit trying to do the impossible!
5. I am not a worm for behaving wormily. Just because I have done something undesirable does not make me a totally undesirable person! After all, I can enjoy just being alive.

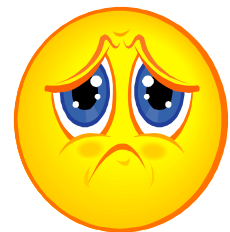
## **C. Be careful! Beware of becoming irresponsible.**

The above does not mean for you to adopt the attitude that you do not care about your behaviour merely that you do not unnecessarily upset yourself over the inevitable mistakes all fallible human beings make from time to time. Being relatively free of shame will actually help you to make constructive changes in your life so that you will be less likely to continue making the same mistakes!

## **DEPRESSION**

Depression might be called "public enemy number one" in the negative emotions department. Like fear, anger, and shame, it can exist in all degrees.

Depression is probably responsible for a very substantial reduction in productivity. It has been estimated that if we could eliminate depression in all its many forms we could boost our gross national product and balance the national budget in just a few years! Think about it: Haven't there been plenty of days in your life that you just didn't "feel like" working or being productive? Very likely, those were days when you were having a mild depression. In addition, depression, like fear, anger and shame, is largely caused and maintained by irrational thinking. It is impossible to be really depressed without THINKING SOMETHING! That may be the main reason why electro-convulsive therapy (shock treatments) are effective in relieving depression: the treatments interrupt the depressive thoughts, which maintain the depression! When the person wakes up they cannot remember what they were depressed about!



In the previous sections, we have seen that fear is largely caused by awfulising, anger by demanding and shame by self-downing. However, it would be more accurate to say that fear (which is the simplest negative feeling) is caused by awfulising, anger (which is a little more complicated) is caused by awfulising AND demanding, and shame (more complicated still) is caused by awfulising AND demanding AND self-downing. Depression is caused by "all of the above" PLUS an attitude or belief system which we call attachment or "poor me-ing".

Attachment is the belief that you cannot do without something or that you cannot possibly be happy without it. The truth is that happiness does not crucially depend on having ANYTHING. Remind yourself that everything you now have and enjoy you will lose some day if you live long enough. In addition, haven't you known old people who had lost many things who were brave and cheerful? It is NICE to have love, possessions, good times, money. However, it is not ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY for happiness! Many people have gone to Tibet and meditated on a mountaintop for years in order to learn this very important lesson. Nevertheless, you can learn it much more quickly and effectively without all that trouble. Of course, a lot of practice is required. The following outline gives the most important causes and cures of depression.

## **FOUR COMMON CAUSES OF DEPRESSION AND THEIR CURES**

### **A. Causes (awfulising, demanding, self-downing, and attachment)**

1. I cannot be happy unless so-and-so loves me!
2. I am a failure. Everything about me is no good!
3. A person who has \_\_\_\_\_ as I have is better off dead!
4. I am no good unless \_\_\_\_\_!

### **B. Cures (disliking, preferring, self-acceptance, and realistic independence)**

1. Who says I cannot be happy without so-and-so? I was happy before I ever met him or her!
2. How can I BE a failure? I can fail, but that certainly does not mean that I AM a failure! After all, I can still breathe and blink my eyes. I am not failing at everything!
3. How is ANYONE better off dead? Nonsense! As long as I am alive, I have choices. When I am dead, I will not have any choices.
4. Who says I HAVE to \_\_\_\_\_? Why do I HAVE TO BE smarter, better looking, and more successful? It might be nice, but it is not NECESSARY for happiness. I can enjoy being alive just because I exist! I am good enough for myself as long as I am breathing!

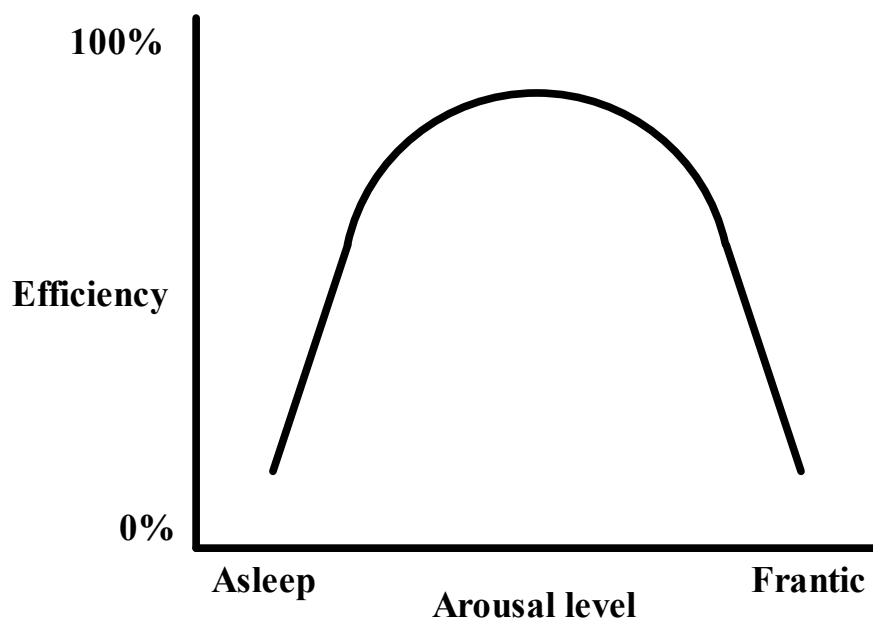
### **C. Be careful! Beware of becoming arrogant, or egotistical**

The above does not mean to try to convince yourself that you are better than you are at anything or that you do not care about the opinion of others or that you do not strive to achieve meaningful goals. What it does mean is that you can train yourself to be pretty brave and cheerful no matter what! That way you will get more love, like yourself better, and accomplish more in life.



### Some Theoretical Considerations

This discussion appears to assume that the only causes of emotions are psychological ones. We know better than this. We all inherit a nervous system and an endocrine system, which together give each of us a temperament that will characterise us throughout our lives, with minor variations. There is very good evidence nowadays that depression, in particular, has strong biological determinants. I have not the slightest doubt that a tendency to be fearful, angry or shame-ridden is also strongly influenced by biological factors. Undergraduate students of psychology may be heard saying things like "Is it psychological or is it physical?" This is naive. Everything is psychological and physical at the same time. In addition, the interaction of the two levels of events is often very complex. The present discussion, however, can be a significant help even when there are strong biological predisposing factors. These ideas are presented to supplement chemotherapy and other forms of physical treatment, not to replace them.



Moreover, another possible misconception in reading this for the first time is that the aim is to eliminate emotions altogether. Are we all to become Vulcans like Spock in

Startrek? No indeed! Emotion is an essential ingredient in good constructive competent living. Please note that we have been discussing only negative emotions, which reduce our efficiency or bring about other undesired consequences. A well-known principle of psychology may help to clarify this point. It is known as the Yerkes Dodson Law. It can be best understood by studying the diagram above.

This diagram plots efficiency (or perhaps we should call it effectiveness) against arousal level. Efficiency can be anything from zero to 100% and arousal level can vary from asleep to frantic. The diagram says that we are not very efficient or effective when we are not very aroused or not strongly motivated, that we are not very efficient or effective when we are too aroused or too strongly motivated, and that we are at our best when we have an optimal level of arousal or motivation. Arousal level here is taken to be essentially the same thing as strength of emotion or, if you prefer, strength of motivation. The graph might be considered to represent all four of the "negative emotions" we have described here with the words, "fear", "anger", "shame" and "depression" representing the extreme right-hand end of the continuum. Adaptive strengths of these four negative emotions (which are only negative because they are too intense) might be alertness, preparedness, and caution instead of fear; determination, dedication, and assertiveness instead of anger; rational regret and resolve to do better in the future in place of shame; and independence, self reliance, and rational self acceptance instead of depression.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reference: This article is based on an original web publication <http://www.truthtree.com/rat.shtml>